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EXCERPT:

A Matter of Character

Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy
by Roger Morris.
Harper & Row, 312 pp., $10.95

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When they returned from lunch on January 20, 1969, senior officials of the State and Defense departments and the CIA found on their desks a top secret paper from the new White House. Entitled National Security Study Memorandum No. 1, it ordered prompt answers to a long list of questions for a review of Vietnam policy. The more perceptive of those who read it that afternoon, Roger Morris says, recognized the memorandum as the signal of a *coup d'état*—"a seizure of power unprecedented in American foreign policy."

The change so colorfully characterized was a concentration of the decision-making process in the hands of the new President's Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry Kissinger. A plan approved by Richard Nixon before his inauguration reversed the old assumption that the departments develop policy and present it to the White House in final form for approval; instead, Kissinger was to define the alternatives and control the process from beginning to end. In foreign policy as in law, he who frames the questions often determines the answers.

The new decision-making structure was designed by Morton Halperin, a thirty-year-old Pentagon official whom Kissinger asked to the Nixon transition office. Halperin, having experienced the difficulty of getting critical views on Vietnam through to Lyndon Johnson, intended to make sure that the president had a real choice of policy alternatives. But Kissinger dominated the process from the start, the departments were effectively emasculated, and soon the policy reviews became empty formalities. Halperin had helped to create a system more single-minded than ever, more secretive, more hostile to dissent—and, incidentally, one that greatly enlarged the destruction in Indochina.

Roger Morris was one of Kissinger's young men in the White House until he and two others resigned in May 1970, over the invasion of Cambodia. During the last several years, in frequent magazine articles, he has argued for deeper and more critical public understanding of foreign policy and its makers. Reviewing *Kissinger*, by Marvin and Bernard Kalb, in *The Washington Monthly*, he deplored "superficial, misleading books" and said that what was needed was "an investigative report" on Kissinger. That is what he has set out to supply: a book penetrating appearances to give us the reality of the policy-making process in general and Kissinger's in particular.

The book does provide significant new glimpses of the authentic Kissinger.

Morris discusses, shrewdly though with no new facts, the episode that I think revealed the most about Henry Kissinger while he was in office: the wiretapping of seventeen of his assistants, other officials, and journalists. On May 9, 1969, *The New York Times* carried a story by William Beecher saying that US planes were secretly bombing Cambodia. Kissinger, who was in Key Biscayne with Nixon, telephoned J. Edgar Hoover to say that the story was "extraordinarily damaging." There were three other telephone conversations between them that day, and Hoover's notes of the calls said "they will destroy whoever did this if we can find him." The next day Kissinger sent Haig to the FBI with the names of four people to be investigated, including Halperin. Others followed. Kissinger later called his role "passive," but there can no longer be any doubt that he picked many of the targets, knew they were to be wiretapped, and got summaries of the transcripts of the taps.

On May 12, 1973, after knowledge of the Halperin tap had become public, Kissinger was asked at a press conference whether he had been "aware at the time it was taking place that the home of one of your staff members was being wiretapped." A truthful answer would have been Yes. What Kissinger said was, in relevant part:

> The CIA and the FBI submit reports through my office when they concern national security. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these reports are always at the direction of the Director of the Agency...and follow duly constituted processes. My office has not handled or been aware of any activities that were conducted by other processes. The overwhelming majority of reports that come through my office from both of these agencies concern matters of foreign intelligence. In a very few cases where it concerns allegations of the mishandling of classified information that was within the purview of the NSC, I would receive summaries of reports from agency heads concerning these activities....

On May 29, under further questioning about the taps, Kissinger conceded: "My office supplied the names of some of the individuals who had access to the information that was being investigated." On September 10, at his confirmation hearing for Secretary of State, he said wiretapping "raises the balance between human liberty and the requirements of national security, and I would say that...the demonstration of national security must be overwhelming." But the questions continued.

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On June 11, 1974, he called a press conference in Salzburg and said he would resign if his "public honor" was put in doubt over the tapping issue. He had tried, he said, to

> do what I could to maintain the dignity of American values and to give Americans some pride in the conduct of their affairs.... I have attempted, however inadequate, to set some standards in my public life.... It is impossible and incompatible with the dignity of the United States to have its senior official and to have its Secretary of State under this sort of attack in the face of the dangers we confront and the risks that may have to be run and the opportunities that may have to be seized. This is a fact. This is not a threat.

It is necessary to detail the wiretapping affair at such length because even now, only a few years later, few remember—or can believe—the ripeness of what Kissinger did and said. It was a record of paranoia and mendacity, salted with self-pity. Morris suggests that the "sense of outrage, anguish and victimization" projected in Salzburg was genuine, not put on, and his argument is convincing. Kissinger believed, he says, that statesmen had a *droit de seigneur* allowing them to use any necessary methods and to shade the truth for higher purposes of the state.

But why would Kissinger have become so agitated in the first place about a leak on bombing already known to those being bombed? Morris says his fervor in pursuing the leaker served to demonstrate his loyalty to Nixon, just as his support of the bombing itself "vouchsafed his toughness for the joint chiefs. Nothing more than principle was sacrificed."

In reviewing the Kalbs' book three years ago, Morris said the country needed a study of Kissinger as the quintessential politician, addressed with "the same sense of proportion, healthy skepticism and self-confidence we now apply to local politicians." What was important about Kissinger was the way he manipulated Congress and the media and the bureaucracy and all his constituencies, foreign and domestic.

Judged by those aims, *Uncertain Greatness* is a curiously unsatisfactory book. Its judgments are pungent, and I agree with many of them, but it does not provide a coherent analysis of the politics of foreign policy or of the way Kissinger played the game. It is episodic, like a collection of pieces of investigative journalism. When Morris was a participant himself, as for example on policy toward southern Africa, the accounts are compelling. (Who could resist the story of a National Security Council meeting at which Spiro Agnew confused Rhodesia with South Africa and Richard Helms read an intelligence brief, evidently informed by the CIA's friends in the white security services, so contemptuous of black Africans that even Kissinger was startled? Other times the statements are colorful but the evidence thin. Morris says flatly that the CIA station in Pnompenh informed Washington of the coup "well in advance," and probably had seen the plans. One wants to know a lot more about that interesting assertion.

Morris does go back to the Halperin plan as the beginning of Kissinger's grip on the system. But he does not really explain how this extraordinary man proceeded from there. One gets a little peek, now and then, of the Kissinger equivalent of Lyndon Johnson's hand stroking a senator's back—a stroke for Jean Mayer, say, or Edward Kennedy. But we do not end up understanding, in the large, how the manipulation worked.

Moreover, Morris seems to have a low opinion of just about everyone who has anything to do with foreign policy: Kissinger's predecessors and successors, the State Department hierarchy under both Nixon and Carter, the Foreign Service, Congress, journalists, presidents, the public. If there is an unqualified good word for anyone in this book, I missed it. That disdain, combined with an evident belief that American foreign policy could work if only the fools got out of the way, produces a certain air of condescension, like that of a younger Pooh-Bah.

But the oddest feature of this book is its conclusion. After uncovering the inhumanity of Henry Kissinger in this episode and that, and deploring it, Morris seems to revert at the end to the Washington morality of toughness. Foreign policy, he says, is now in the hands of second-rate men, "a provincial, mediocre establishment that has survived its past folly by public amnesia and indifference." There can be "no American statesmanship worth the name" unless the foreign-policy bureaucracy is sweepingly reformed. And there is only one man to do that: Henry Kissinger. He alone has the power to educate us, and to be heeded. "The zealot for secrecy must become the advocate of openness..., the seducer of the press and Congress the critic of every such seduction, the practitioner of ruthless *Realpolitik* the champion of a new humanity in American foreign policy."

Yes, and he will call spirits from the vasty deep. That Morris can end by calling on Super-K to rescue us shows that he has not understood the simplest lesson of our recent history: that the character of our political leaders is as important as their intelligence or political skills.